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**Embeddedness and the Repatriation Intention of Assigned and  
Self-initiated Expatriates**

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# **Embeddedness and the Repatriation Intention of Assigned and Self-initiated Expatriates**

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## **Abstract**

Expatriation research has been intrigued by the question of how to prevent the unplanned return of expatriates to their home country. Although a majority of studies have focused on assigned expatriates (AEs), only recently have researchers expanded the scope of analysis by focusing on self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). For SIEs, research has identified job embeddedness as a key explanatory concept for early repatriation without yet acknowledging its potential to also explain the early expatriation of AEs. However, because AEs and SIEs differ in important motivational and behavioural aspects, the lack of comparative studies prohibits a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which job embeddedness influences early repatriation. We build on belongingness theory to conceptualize early repatriation as a compensatory reaction of expatriates to an inhibited need to belong. Using a unique sample of 345 expatriates from 40 countries, we show that off-the-job embeddedness is more important for explaining the repatriation intention of AEs than of SIEs, whereas on-the-job embeddedness is more important for explaining the repatriation of SIEs compared to AEs. Our integrative model carries important theoretical implications for expatriation research and provides managerial implications for recruiting and retaining AEs and SIEs.

## **Keywords**

Expatriation, embeddedness, repatriation intention, assigned expatriates, self-initiated expatriates, international human resource management

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## 1. Introduction

In today's global economy, firms create competitive advantage by employing an internationally experienced and culturally sensitive workforce (e.g., Chang, Gong, & Peng, 2012; Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010; Silvanto & Ryan, 2014; Tharenou, 2015). Accordingly, multinational, international, and local firms increasingly rely on expatriates as valuable employees (S. J. Black & Gregersen, 1999). Many empirical studies emphasize the significant contributions of expatriates due to their ability to transfer knowledge, skills, and technologies to the host country organizations (e.g., Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005; Chang, et al., 2012; Furnham, 2017; Gong, 2003; Tung, 2008). If firms are to benefit from the potential contributions of expatriates, they must understand the motivational and behavioral aspects of expatriation to develop means for hiring, supporting, and retaining the increasing number of expatriates (Brookfield, 2012; OECD, 2008; Vaiman, Haslberger, & Vance, 2015).

Within the expatriate literature, several researchers have focused on expatriates' repatriation intention (e.g., De Cieri, Sheehan, Costa, Fenwick, & Cooper, 2009; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Repatriation is the act of returning to one's home country after working abroad for a significant period (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Early repatriation<sup>1</sup> occurs when an expatriate returns home due to unforeseen or unforeseeable non-contractual reasons. Early repatriation has major managerial implications for firms because of its direct (e.g., replacement) and potential indirect costs (e.g., damaged corporate reputations) (J. S. Black & Gregersen, 1990). For these reasons, early expatriation is often equated with (a complete) expatriation failure (Harzing, 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have also referred to such early unplanned expatriation as premature or unplanned expatriation or as expatriation failure (see e.g., Banai, 1992; Harzing, 1995).

Prior expatriation research has largely focused on company repatriation policies, adjustment difficulties, or job turnover among those expatriates who were deployed abroad by their employers. More recently, researchers argued for the importance of distinguishing assigned expatriates (AEs), who are sent abroad by their employers, from self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), who move abroad on their own initiative (Bjerregaard, 2014; McNulty & Brewster, 2017; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Global and multinational corporations increasingly rely on SIEs to address their shortage of skilled labor and international managers (Banai & Harry, 2004; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010; West & Bogumil, 2000). SIEs relocate to a country of their choice to seek a job or pursue an entrepreneurial venture (Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008; Saxenian, 2005). SIEs often move abroad without a planned or predetermined duration to stay (Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004; Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

Due to the recent focus on SIEs in the expatriation literature, and their intrinsic motivation to relocate abroad, expatriation research has more recently drawn on the concept of job embeddedness to explain early repatriation (Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012; Reiche, Kraimer, & Harzing, 2011; Ren, Bolino, Shaffer, & Kraimer, 2013; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). These studies make important contributions to expatriation research by identifying and establishing job embeddedness as a key explanatory concept for repatriation. Historically, job embeddedness served to explain local voluntary turnover (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001). In the context of expatriation, job embeddedness provides a comprehensive concept that accounts for the contextual and perceptual forces that bind people to the location, people, and issues at work (Yao, Lee, Mitchell, Burton, & Sablinski, 2004).

Despite these recent advancements, two factors obscure a deeper understanding of how job embeddedness affects early repatriation. First, those studies that explicitly examine how on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness affect expatriates' repatriation intention draw exclusively

on SIEs, thereby ignoring how embeddedness affects the repatriation intention of AEs. Second, the lack of expatriation research directly comparing AEs and SIEs forbears a better understanding of how the motivational and behavioral differences between AEs and SIEs influence the mechanisms through which on- and off-the-job embeddedness affect the intention to repatriate prematurely. For firms, understanding the differences in how job embeddedness affects the repatriation intention of SIEs and AEs is important to avoid an unexpected loss of particular skills and to reduce the risk of replacing SIEs—who are commonly employed according to local employment conditions—with more costly AEs (Jokinen, et al., 2008; Myers & Pringle, 2005).

In this article, we respond to calls for more comparative research in examining the differences in the repatriation process between AEs and SIEs (e.g., Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013; Von Borell de Araujo, Mendes Teixeira, Da Cruz, & Malini, 2014). Drawing on belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), we argue that expatriates require a strong sense of belonging to their social and professional environment. For more isolated expatriates who experience a lack of belongingness, repatriation serves as a means to regain a sense of belonging when embeddedness abroad is low. Consequently, we argue that AEs and SIEs may repatriate for different reasons. Drawing on a culturally diverse sample of 345 expatriates from 40 different home countries, we develop broader conclusions about the validity of the embeddedness-repatriation relationship in the expatriation context.

We structure our article as follows. Section 2 introduces our theory and hypotheses. Section 3 provides information on data and methods. Section 4 describes our analysis and results. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings, offers limitations and avenues for future research, and concludes.



## **2. Theory and Hypotheses**

Repatriation is the act of returning to one's home country after working abroad for a significant period (J. S. Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Harvey, 1989; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Repatriation itself is not necessarily problematic. For example, expatriates may return to their home country because they have completed a contractually agreed-upon time abroad or assignment overseas. Such "planned" repatriation may have important negative consequences for individuals and firms, especially in the long run because expatriates frequently assume positions in competing firms (Kraimer, et al., 2012).

However, when repatriation is 'unplanned', the negative consequences for involved actors may be immediate and substantive. Because of the direct costs of replacement and the indirect costs such as damaged corporate reputations, lost business, inability to further attract top candidates to overseas positions, and perceived leadership failure, such early repatriation may have substantial negative implications for firms (J. S. Black & Gregersen, 1990). In contrast to the antecedents of planned repatriation, which are usually contractual, those of unplanned repatriation are often negative psychological reasons, such as a sense of frustration or personal failure (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007).

In the context of expatriation, repatriation is one particular form of employee turnover (Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012). Therefore, researchers have recently drawn on the concept of job embeddedness to better understand the circumstances under which expatriates repatriate early. Job embeddedness, a concept that was originally developed by Mitchell, et al. (2001) to explain voluntary employee turnover, describes how individuals become attached to both their job and their surrounding community (Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004; Mitchell, et al., 2001). Employees attach to their organization or their local community by developing links to people and activities, by becoming accustomed to their firms' or their

communities' culture, and by sacrificing the material or psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving a job or a community (Lee, et al., 2004; Mitchell, et al., 2001). This dual focus on an individual's professional and social environment explains why job embeddedness entails two different components: first, on-the-job embeddedness, which relates to an individual as an employee in a firm, and second, off-the-job embeddedness, which relates to an individual as a member of a broader social community.

Contrary to traditional explanations of employee turnover, such as job satisfaction or organizational commitment (Vidal, Valle, & Aragón, 2007), job embeddedness is a broader concept that covers not only organizational but also includes communitarian aspects of an employee. Central to job embeddedness is the idea that individuals are connected in a social web. Therefore, job embeddedness goes beyond the decision of individual employees to participate at work and also considers that employees, if they leave their employer, would also have to break links, lose fit, or make sacrifices in their surrounding community. Mitchell, et al. (2001) explicitly argue that the greater an employee's embeddedness on and off the job is, the higher the likelihood is that he or she will feel professionally and personally tied to an organization and a community and will, in turn, experience a loss when leaving early. Thus, job embeddedness embraces a more complete set of pull-factors that prevent employees from leaving their organization (Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007; Lee, et al., 2004).

That said, our understanding of how on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness affects the early repatriation intention of expatriates remains limited for two important reasons. First, by focusing strongly on better understanding AEs, research on expatriation has historically treated expatriates as a relatively homogenous group (e.g., J. S. Black & Gregersen, 1990; Ren, et al., 2013; Tharenou, 2015; Tung, 1982, 1987; Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown, & Johnson, 2004). AEs are assigned abroad by their company and—possibly due to the substantive costs

involved in sending expatriates abroad—the expatriation literature has focused on examining expatriation policies or cultural adjustment mechanisms of AEs (e.g., Firth, Chen, Kirkman, & Kim, 2014; Harvey, 1989; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Stroh, Gregersen, & Black, 1998). Some studies have also sought to explain the repatriation intention of AEs drawing on historically evoked concepts, such as ‘going native’ (J. S. Black & Gregersen, 1992), emigrants assimilating into a host country (Berry, 1997), and sojourners losing their cultural identity (Sussman, 2002). Most expatriation research that focuses on the specific situation of AEs has paid only little attention to the role of on- and off-the-job embeddedness as a holistic concept for explaining repatriation.

Second, although most expatriation research has neglected the question of how on- and off-the-job embeddedness affects early repatriation intention, those few studies explicitly examining this association have almost exclusively focused on SIEs. For example, Tharenou and Caulfield (2010), drawing on a sample of 546 Australian SIEs, find that on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness reduces repatriation intention and subsequently actual repatriation of expatriates. Similarly, Ren, Shaffer, Harrison, Fu, and Fodchuk (2014) examine 175 teachers who had voluntarily participated in an exchange program to reveal a positive relation between on-the-job embeddedness (Study 1) and the combined fit dimension of on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness (Study 2) with the retention of foreign teachers in the U.S. Further, Lo, Wong, Yam, and Whitfield (2012) examine a sample of 210 self-initiated expatriates in Macao and find that the turnover intention of expatriates and their willingness to accept unsolicited job offers increase with lower host country organizational embeddedness. These studies have not only made important contributions by highlighting the fact that most expatriates are not AEs but SIEs but by establishing job embeddedness as an important indicator for the early repatriation intention of expatriates.

Notwithstanding the recent advancements in the expatriation literature, the lack of more comparative studies on early repatriation intention of AEs and SIEs leads to at least two problems. First, we know relatively little about how on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness of AEs affects their early repatriation intention. Although AEs constitute a smaller share of the overall global expatriation population, they are—compared to SIEs—more expensive and strategically more important for companies. Second, it remains unclear to what extent the motivational and behavioral differences between AEs and SIEs affect the mechanisms through which on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness affect the intention to repatriate prematurely. These two problems may have substantive implications for expatriation theories, for firms, and for expatriates.

### ***2.1. Embeddedness and intention to repatriate***

In this article, we address these limitations by providing an understanding of how on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness affect the early repatriation intention of both AEs and SIEs. In so doing, we draw on belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Den Hartog, De Hoogh, & Keegan, 2007) to explain the link between job embeddedness and the early repatriation intention of expatriates. Belongingness theory argues that individuals' need for belongingness (or social closeness) explains how they behave and take decisions. Research in social psychology has already shown that people have a fundamental need for belonging and a tendency to form strong and enduring relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Guette & Vandenbempt, 2013; Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco, & Baumeister, 2001). Recent empirical evidence suggests that employees' sense of belonging to an organization predicts when employees engage in behaviors beneficial to an organization (Hommelhoff & Richter, 2017; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). On- and off-the-job embeddedness are particularly conducive to satisfying employees' belongingness needs

through relationships to others (i.e., ‘links’ dimensions) with whom people feel they share important values (i.e., ‘fit’ dimensions) (Den Hartog, et al., 2007).

Importantly, belongingness theory argues that when individuals’ need to belong is *not* satisfied they would take actions to regain a sense of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Derfler-Rozin, Pillutla, & Thau, 2010; Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008). From the perspective of belongingness theory, one can conceptualize early repatriation as a behavior intended to compensate for expatriates’ thwarted need to belong. Accordingly, expatriates should intend to repatriate early when their levels of on- and off-the-job embeddedness are low because they can expect that returning home will provide them both with higher levels of embeddedness than will staying abroad and thus with a greater sense of belonging.

Extending the recent findings in expatriation research to the embeddedness-repatriation of SIEs, we expect that on- and off-the-job embeddedness will each decrease the repatriation intention of both SIEs and AEs.

Hypothesis 1. On-the-job embeddedness is negatively related to early repatriation intention for both SIEs and AEs.

Hypothesis 2. Off-the-job embeddedness is negatively related to early repatriation intention for both SIEs and AEs.

## ***2.2. Differences between AEs and SIEs in On-the-Job Embeddedness and Off-the-Job***

### ***Embeddedness and Intention to Repatriate***

While we expect a similar reaction of the early repatriation intention of AEs and SIEs to low levels of on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness, research has shown that SIEs and AEs differ importantly in a number of motivational and behavioral characteristics. For example, past

research suggests that SIEs—unlike AEs—tend to have higher interpersonal skills (Selmer & Leung, 2003), seek international experiences more strongly (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009) and desire to experience new adventures (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Moreover, SIEs have different professions and educational backgrounds (Suutari & Brewster, 2000), are more prone to become ‘serial’ expatriates (Thorn & Inkson, 2012) and are younger and more often female (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). These differences between AEs and SIEs may explain different mechanisms between on- and off-the-job embeddedness and the early repatriation intention of AEs and SIEs.

### ***2.3. On-the-job embeddedness***

When the on-the-job embeddedness in the host country is low, SIEs may expect more benefits from early repatriation compared to AEs. Whereas AEs are sent by their home companies to local subsidiaries to accomplish a specific job and organization-related goals (Edström & Galbraith, 1977), most SIEs first expatriate and only subsequently find work in a foreign firm (Jokinen, et al., 2008). SIEs may thus accept employment opportunities that do not fit their skills and professional experience. Suutari and Brewster (2000), for example, find that SIEs put less emphasis on career goals than do AEs. Furthermore, SIEs might accept jobs in which they are not very interested or skilled to secure an income. As Peltokorpi and Froese (2009, p. 1102) emphasize, SIEs ‘not only have to cope with the cross-cultural complexities, but also need to adjust to a new job at an unknown company.’

Instead, AEs are already socialized within the firm they work for and are prepared for their tasks. Despite potential strategic and organizational differences between home and host country organizations, the organization’s culture and certain policies will often be similar across subsidiaries (Thite, Wilkinson, & Shah, 2012). Thus, AEs are already familiar with the

overarching structure, culture, and policies of the host country organization before their departure and should have a strong fit with the foreign subsidiary. For AEs repatriating should make less of a difference if they do their job in their home organization or the foreign subsidiary because they return to a relatively familiar job in a very familiar culture. In contrast, SIEs should benefit more from repatriating to their home country in terms of on-the-job embeddedness compared to AEs because SIEs are much less familiar with their work environment when living abroad.

Repatriation thus promises a return to a work environment that they know and within a culture they understand. The promise of experiencing belongingness by an act of returning home should thus be greater for SIEs than for AEs when experiencing low levels of on-the-job embeddedness. For these reasons, we expect that SIEs will respond more strongly to low levels of on-the-job embeddedness than AEs. Accordingly, when on-the-job embeddedness is low, SIEs will be more likely to intend to repatriate early compared to AEs.

Hypothesis 3. On-the-job embeddedness is more negatively related to early repatriation intention for SIEs than for AEs.

#### ***2.4. Off-the-job embeddedness***

AEs often do not initiate an international assignment themselves, nor do they choose the host country destination. For example, Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso, and Werther (2012) find that about half of the AEs experience pressure by their employer to accept an international assignment. By accepting international assignments in a country of their employers'—not their own—choice, AEs may have difficulties establishing links to local communities. Being 'unrooted' from their home, AEs often expect that—upon their return—they can easily fit back into the community (Hammer, Hart, & Rogan, 1998). Therefore, AEs who experience low off-the-job embeddedness

in their host country should be more likely to prematurely return home because they may expect that their friends and family are waiting for them and that they will easily re-connect to them.

In contrast, SIEs may have left their home country for longer-term unification with friends, spouses, or relatives living in the host country (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Vance, 2005). Thus, for SIEs, returning home for reasons of low off-the-job embeddedness does not necessarily hold the promise of returning into a community of friends and family. The promise of experiencing belongingness by an act of returning home should thus be greater for AEs than for SIEs when experiencing low levels of off-the-job embeddedness. Together, this suggests that for AEs, repatriation is more likely if they experience low levels of off-the-job embeddedness in the host country compared to SIEs.

Hypothesis 4. Off-the-job embeddedness is more negatively related to early repatriation intention for AEs than for SIEs.

### **3. Methods**

#### ***3.1. Data Collection Procedures***

To test our hypotheses, we collected data in 2014 through an online survey covering a broad range of expatriates with different nationalities. We developed two versions of the questionnaire: an original English questionnaire and a German questionnaire. We translated the original English items back and forth several times to prevent ambiguous questions and ensure the equal meaning of the two surveys (Knoppen, et al., 2015).

Similar to other expatriate studies, we cooperated with several intermediaries such as alumni associations and other expatriate associations (e.g., Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013; Peltokorpi, 2008; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). We collected data in two phases. In the first phase, we directly contacted 403 expatriate associations by email, explaining the purpose of the



survey and asking their representatives to forward the link to their associations' members. In the second phase, we advertised the survey on the website and the monthly newsletter of the Organization of the Swiss Abroad (OSA), a Swiss expatriate association. The questionnaire was identical for all participants during that time.

The survey was open for participation for a period of eight months. During this time, the survey received 2,335 clicks and 1,098 people partly answered the questionnaire. We removed 111 participants from the sample because they did not meet the criteria for being classified as expatriates and 642 participants due to missing data in the outcome, explanatory, or control variables. Our final sample comprises 345 expatriates, a response rate of 31.42% (of respondents who at least partly answered the questionnaire).

### ***3.2. Sample***

Our final sample of 345 expatriates is highly heterogeneous, with 80 AEs and 265 SIEs from 40 different countries<sup>2</sup>, with Swiss (52.2%), German (11.9%), and American (6.7%) expatriates forming the largest groups. Most respondents are male (61.1%), highly educated (70.2% attained a university degree) and, on average, 40 years old and have spent an average of twelve years abroad. The majority of expatriates (40.1%) live abroad with their partner and children, whereas 33.6% live only with their partner. Four expatriates live only with their children, and 24.3% live with neither partner nor children abroad.

The expatriates in our sample work in 59 different countries; 13.9 % of the SIEs and AEs in the sample expatriated to the United States. Their local (host country) employers operate in different industries, with education (11.6%), finance and insurance (10.4%), and health care and life sciences (8.4%) representing the largest industries. Most expatriates (30.4%) are senior-level managers or employees (38.3%), 15.9% are middle-level managers, and 15.4% work as front-line

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<sup>2</sup> Rather than nationality, we used the expatriates' high school location as a proxy for their home country.

managers. Furthermore, 75.9% of the SIEs are employed by a domestic firm, and 24.1% work in a subsidiary of a foreign firm. Except for the heterogeneity of expatriates' home and host country location, which prevents location-specific characteristics from creating bias in our results, the demographics of our sample are comparable to those of previous studies (e.g., Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010).

### **3.3. Measures**

We draw on prior expatriation research to develop our measures for the dependent, independent, and control variables. We measure all items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The Appendix A provides the items for all scales. We averaged all items within each scale to form the scores.

#### *3.3.1. Dependent Variable*

To measure expatriates' early repatriation intention, we adapted four items from validated scales of previous studies (Guzzo, Noonan, & Elron, 1994; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Sample items read 'I will request an early return to a domestic assignment with my company' and 'I plan to return to my home country within the next two years.' Importantly, our measure of early repatriation intention includes three specifications. First, our measure focuses on the intention of expatriates to repatriate as an important predictor of actual repatriation. Second, our measure focuses on early and, thus, not planned repatriation. Third, our measure specifies the return to one's home country as opposed to another foreign country. This is particularly important because especially SIEs show a tendency to relocate to a country of their choice (often other than their home country) to seek a job or try an entrepreneurial venture (Harrison, et al., 2004; Jokinen, et al., 2008; Saxenian, 2005). These specifications allow us to avoid confounding with related repatriation measures. The Cronbach's alpha for our measure of repatriation intention is .83.

### 3.3.2. *Independent Variables*

First, to measure on-the-job embeddedness we used Crossley et al.'s (2007) shortened and validated seven-item measure rather than Mitchell and colleague's (2001) original 22-item version because the short scale reduces the length of the questionnaire and thereby avoids careless responses (Breaugh & Colihan, 1994). To adjust the measure to our context, we replaced 'organization' in each item with 'subsidiary,' thereby asking respondents effectively about their attachment to their local employer (host country organization) rather than their global employer ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). A sample item was 'I feel attached to this subsidiary.'

Second, to measure off-the-job embeddedness, we used Mitchell et al.'s (2001) validated measure, adjusting the items to the expatriate context (see also, Lee, et al., 2004). A sample item was 'This community is a good match for me.' Off-the-job embeddedness consists out of three distinct dimensions (fit, sacrifice, and links), and we first averaged the items within a dimension and then averaged the three dimensions ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ). Third, by asking whether expatriates were sent by their employer to work in a foreign subsidiary, we classified respondents into the two expatriate types as either AEs or SIEs.

### 3.3.3. *Control Variables*

To separate the effect of our explanatory variables from possibly confounding effects, we control for four factors that previous literature has shown to be significantly related to repatriation intention. First, expatriates who have been living abroad for a longer period are less likely to repatriate (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). We therefore include the *number of years an expatriate spent abroad*. Second, previous studies have shown that female expatriates adjust better to the host country community, possibly due to better interpersonal skills (e.g., Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Selmer & Leung, 2003). This suggests that women may find it more difficult to break

established links within the community than men (Jiang, Liu, McKay, Lee, & Mitchell, 2012), leading to a lower repatriation intention. We therefore included gender as a control variable. Third, because age may affect the likelihood of repatriation we controlled for this effect by including the expatriate's age. Fourth, expatriates with supervisory responsibilities assume a more important role in the host country organization, which may make it more difficult for them to leave their position (Biemann & Andresen, 2010). We thus control for the expatriates' supervisory responsibilities with a binary variable.

#### **4. Analysis and Results**

We use OLS regressions similar to other studies in expatriation research (e.g., Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010; Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005). The variance inflation factors, including all explanatory variables, control variables, and interaction terms, are all smaller than 1.8, which is below the recommended threshold of 3.0 (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010), thus mitigating potential concerns of multicollinearity. Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for the variables included in the analysis.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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In line with previous studies (e.g., Takeuchi, et al., 2005), on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness are negatively related to repatriation intention ( $r = -0.17, p < .005$  and  $r = -0.28, p < .001$ , respectively). Furthermore, on- and off-the-job embeddedness are positively related to one another ( $r = 0.27, p < .001$ ), indicating reciprocity between them, whereby being more deeply embedded in the job leads to more embeddedness in the community, which in turn positively affects a deeper embedding at work (see Takeuchi, et al., 2005). The number of years spent

abroad, age, and supervisory responsibilities show a strong or very strong negative correlation with repatriation intention ( $r = -0.30, p < .001$ ,  $r = -0.28, p < .001$ ,  $r = -0.15, p < .005$ ). Gender is not significantly related to repatriation intention but strongly related to expatriate type ( $r = 0.17, p < .005$ ), thereby supporting the findings of other studies (e.g., Suutari & Brewster, 2000) that women more often self-initiate their expatriation rather than being sent abroad by their employers.

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 Insert Table 2 about here  
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Table 2 reports the results of the OLS regressions estimating our econometric model. Hypothesis 1 predicts a negative effect of on-the-job embeddedness on repatriation intention. The association between on-the-job embeddedness and repatriation intention is significant and negative in Model 1 ( $\beta = -.10, p < .05$ ). However, the association is not significant when including control variables in Model 2 ( $\beta < -.06, ns.$ ). Thus, we interpret this as no support for Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 predicts a negative effect of off-the-job embeddedness on repatriation intention. This effect is significant and negative when including the control variables ( $\beta = -.14, p < .01$ ) (Model 2), thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

Furthermore, in Hypothesis 3, we expect the negative relationship between off-the-job embeddedness and repatriation intention to be stronger for AEs than for SIEs (Hypothesis 3). The interaction term for expatriate type and off-the-job embeddedness is significant and negative ( $\beta = -.25, p < .05$ ). We plot the relationship between off-the-job embeddedness and repatriation intention for AEs and SIEs. Figure 1 shows that off-the-job embeddedness is negatively and significantly related to repatriation intention for AEs ( $\beta = -.33, p < .01$ ) but not for SIEs ( $\beta = -.08,$

*ns*). We conduct a simple slope analysis and find that difference between the slopes is significant ( $t = -2.26, p < .05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

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Insert Figure 1 and 2 about here  
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Finally, in Hypothesis 4, we predict that the negative relationship between on-the-job embeddedness and repatriation intention will be stronger for SIEs than for AEs. The interaction term for expatriate type and off-the-job embeddedness is significant ( $\beta = .26, p < .05$ ). We also plot the relationship between on-the-job embeddedness and repatriation intention for AEs and SIEs. Figure 2 shows that on-the-job embeddedness is not significantly related to repatriation intention for AEs ( $\beta = .15, ns$ ) but is significantly and negatively related to repatriation intention for SIEs ( $\beta = -.11, p = .05$ ). The difference between the slopes is significant ( $t = 1.99, p < .05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 4 is also supported.

## **5. Discussion**

Although previous studies have investigated the link between embeddedness and repatriation intention only for SIEs, we followed recent calls for more comparative studies between AEs and SIEs as a largely unexplored aspect in expatriation research (e.g., Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010; Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013; Von Borell de Araujo, et al., 2014). Extending the logic that on- and off-the-job embeddedness are important for understanding the repatriation intention of expatriates and, in particular, for understanding the different repatriation behaviors of AEs and SIEs, we contribute to expatriation research by revealing how on- and off-the-job embeddedness are differently linked to repatriation intention for the two expatriate types.

### ***5.1. Theoretical Implications***

On-the-job embeddedness plays an essential role in explaining the repatriation intention of SIEs. Because SIEs are more likely to encounter unexpected situations within the host country organization due to their unfamiliarity with the organization's policies and culture, we argue that this unfamiliarity may cause a stronger relationship between on-the-job embeddedness and repatriation intention for SIEs than for AEs. Our findings support this argument and show that for expatriates who self-initiate their international experience, embeddedness on the job turns out to be a decisive factor.

Instead, off-the-job embeddedness appears to be more important for explaining the repatriation intention of AEs than of SIEs. Our findings suggest that because AEs are already familiar with the employing firm's culture and policies before departure, they know better what to expect in the host country organization and are less likely to encounter job-related shocks during their international experience than SIEs are. Because of this familiarity, on-the-job embeddedness may not play a critical role for AEs' repatriation intention. Because of their strong social network that awaits AEs at home, repatriation appears to be a logical response for AEs when experiencing low levels of off-the-job embeddedness.

Our results provide strong evidence that, on a general level, on- and off-the-job embeddedness are negatively related to repatriation intention of both AEs and SIEs. By following recent calls for more comparative studies between AEs and SIEs as a largely unexplored aspect in expatriation research, our results also indicate that this relationship depends on the type of expatriate. We reveal important differences between AEs and SIEs, thereby providing important qualifications to existing theories on the link between embeddedness and repatriation.

For example, we find that SIEs experience a higher degree of off-the-job embeddedness than AEs do. However, AEs and SIEs do not differ with respect to their on-the-job embeddedness. It appears that the capability of SIEs for cultural adaptation expands beyond the social environment and facilitates their embedding in professional contexts. Peltokorpi and Froese (2009) suggest that SIEs experience higher interaction adjustment with host nationals and show higher general adjustment (e.g., healthcare, shopping, and housing) than AEs. If SIEs have little difficulty in adjusting to the general circumstances, they may also find it easy to establish links to coworkers and a fit with the host country organization. Consequently, reciprocity between on- and off-the-job embeddedness may be more important for understanding the early repatriation of AEs. SIEs' higher general adjustment may balance out AEs' familiarity with the firm, leading to an equally high level of on-the-job embeddedness.

Moreover, contrasting our findings with those from related studies, we reveal important differences between the types of expatriates and their cultural background. The diversity of national backgrounds and of host countries is a particular strength of our sample because it reduces the possibility that our effects are confounded with culture. Much research on repatriation intention has considered expatriates from one national background moving to the same host country (e.g., Reiche, et al., 2011; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010; Von Borell de Araujo, et al., 2014). For example, using a sample of 546 Australian SIEs, Tharenou and Caulfield (2010) suggest that both on- and off-the-job embeddedness are critical in SIEs' repatriation intention. However, drawing on data from respondents with different cultural backgrounds in various host countries, we are unable to replicate Tharenou and Caulfield's (2010) finding that on-the-job embeddedness equally matters for SIEs. One possible explanation for this difference might lie in the cultural homogeneity of Tharenou and Caulfield's (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010) sample of expatriates from Australia. Australian SIEs, irrespective of their choice of host country, may



place more value on non-work-related contacts than expatriates from other cultural backgrounds so that the relationship between off-the-job embeddedness and repatriation intention may be stronger for Australian SIEs. Culturally homogenous samples increase the odds that specific characteristics of the home or host country affect the relationship that is being investigated, a problem that is unlikely to bias our results.

### ***5.2. Managerial Implications***

Our findings suggest several important managerial implications for improving the work-life situation of both SIEs and AEs. For example, our results imply that the role of on- and off-the-job embeddedness in explaining voluntary turnover or repatriation intention differs not only between local and foreign employees but also between AEs and SIEs. If firms, particularly large multinational companies that rely on the contribution of expatriates, seek to avoid turnover and early repatriations, they clearly need to distinguish not only between local and foreign employees but also between AEs and SIEs.

Furthermore, firms should consider the significant differences between AEs and SIEs when designing HR practices for recruiting, training, or retaining expatriates. The large share of SIEs in the overall expatriation population offers an attractive alternative for multinational firms to employ SIEs who already live in the host country, rather than sending AEs abroad. A policy of hiring SIEs rather than AEs may be advantageous for two reasons. First, by avoiding the substantive investments necessary for sending AEs, potentially including their families, abroad, the employment of SIEs may be more cost-efficient (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Vaiman, et al., 2015). Second, if firms more easily develop effective measures targeting on-the-job embeddedness—as opposed to off-the-job embeddedness, foreign subsidiaries may find it easier

to retain SIEs than AEs because—as our findings reveal—the repatriation intention of SIEs are primarily related to their level of on-the-job embeddedness.

Our findings suggest that the impact of certain HR practices should differ depending on the expatriate types. For example, because on-the-job embeddedness plays an important role in SIEs' repatriation considerations, host country organizations may decrease the SIEs' repatriation intention more strongly, for example, by emphasizing reward management and career development initiatives (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Similarly, networking events providing an opportunity to connect with other co-workers and, consequently, to become more attached to the host country organization should lower the repatriation intention of SIEs rather than AEs.

In contrast, AEs are more likely to stay in the host country when they are embedded in the host country community. Expanding established supporting schemes, such as family or partner assistance, or community involvement programs (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010) should be particularly useful for enhancing expatriates' attachment to the community and thus for improving AEs' off-the-job embeddedness. In general, however, firms must be aware of the asymmetric and possibly one-sided effect of such measures in that they will largely facilitate the retention of AEs but not SIEs.

### ***5.3. Limitations and Future Research***

Our findings and their implications for expatriation research and research on job embeddedness are limited in at least two ways, which also indicate directions for future research. First, we cannot rule out that the differences between our findings and previous findings are due to cultural differences. Our sample, although it is more culturally diverse than those of previous studies are, draws primarily on data from European expatriates and is thus not representative of the global expatriate population. This limitation in our data should be seen as a call for more expatriation

research on culturally diverse samples and asks for future research to pay more attention to the cultural distance between expatriates' home and host country (Chen, et al., 2010; Van Vianen, et al., 2004).

Second, we are unable to directly measure the underlying mechanism that accounts for our hypothesized relationship. Although our findings indicate that expatriates show a strong desire to be embedded and that early repatriation is a means of regaining a sense of belonging when embeddedness abroad is low, our data do not allow us to test the psychological mechanisms that motivate these differences in early repatriation. Thus, future research may test whether repatriation intention is indeed associated with differences in the expectations of AEs and SIEs regarding their professional and social environment in the host and home country.

#### ***5.4. Conclusions***

In sum, our findings contribute to the expatriation literature by integrating research on job embeddedness, expatriate types, and repatriation intention in a holistic framework. We argued that expatriates have a strong desire to be embedded and that repatriation is a means of regaining a sense of belonging when embeddedness abroad is low. We find that embeddedness is an important means of reducing the repatriation intention of expatriates but that off-the-job embeddedness appears more important for AEs' rather than SIEs' repatriation intention, whereas on-the-job embeddedness plays a more important role for SIEs' than for AEs' repatriation intention. We hope that these findings will help more firmly establish the concept of embeddedness in the realm of expatriation research and spark more research on the reasons why both types of expatriates differ in their reactions to low levels of on-the-job and off-the-job embeddedness.

## Tables and Figures

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations<sup>a</sup>.

Variable	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Repatriation intention	2.26	0.92							
2. On-the-job embeddedness	2.40	0.45	-.17**						
3. Off-the-job embeddedness	2.92	0.90	-.28***	.27***					
4. Expatriate type (AE = 1)	0.23	0.42	.06	-.04	-.08				
5. Years abroad	14.90	12.42	-.30***	.19***	.37***	-.05			
6. Gender (Male = 1)	0.61	0.48	.06	.05	-.09	.17**	.08		
7. Age	43.01	12.51	-.28***	.25***	.38***	.06	.80***	.19***	
8. Supervisor responsibilities (Yes = 1)	0.55	0.50	-.15**	.14*	.04	.27***	.06	.19***	.15**

<sup>a</sup> †  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

N = 345. Expatriate type, gender, and supervisor responsibilities are binary variables.

Table 2. Results of Moderated Regression Analyses on Repatriation intention<sup>a</sup>.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Independent variables <sup>a</sup>	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
<i>Main variables</i>						
On-the-job embeddedness	-.10*	(.05)	-.06	(.05)	-.10†	(.05)
Off-the-job embeddedness	-.23***	(.05)	-.14**	(.05)	-.07	(.06)
Expatriate type (AE = 1)	.07	(.11)	.14	(.12)	.13	(.12)
<i>Control variables</i>						
Years abroad			-.01†	(.01)	-.01†	(.01)
Age			-.01	(.01)	-.01	(.01)
Gender (Male = 1)			.19†	(.10)	.21*	(.10)
Supervisor responsibilities (Yes = 1)			-.28**	(.10)	-.29**	(.10)
<i>Interactions</i>						
On-the-job embeddedness X expatriate type					.26*	(.13)
Off-the-job embeddedness X expatriate type					-.26*	(.11)
R <sup>2</sup>	.09		.16		.18	
Change in R <sup>2</sup>			.07***		.02*	

<sup>a</sup> † p < .10; \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

N = 345. We show standardized regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in brackets. Except for 'years abroad', continuous variables are standardized.

Figure 1. Off-the-job Embeddedness Relation - Moderating Effects of Expatriation Type on Early Repatriation Intention.

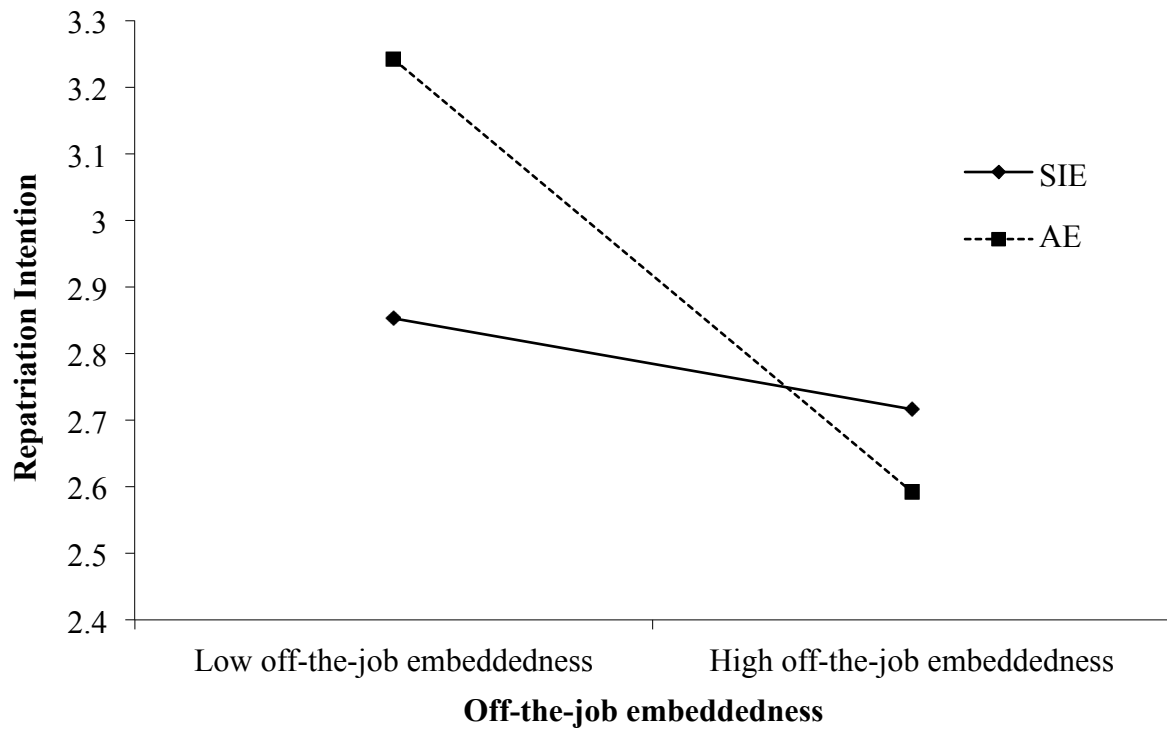
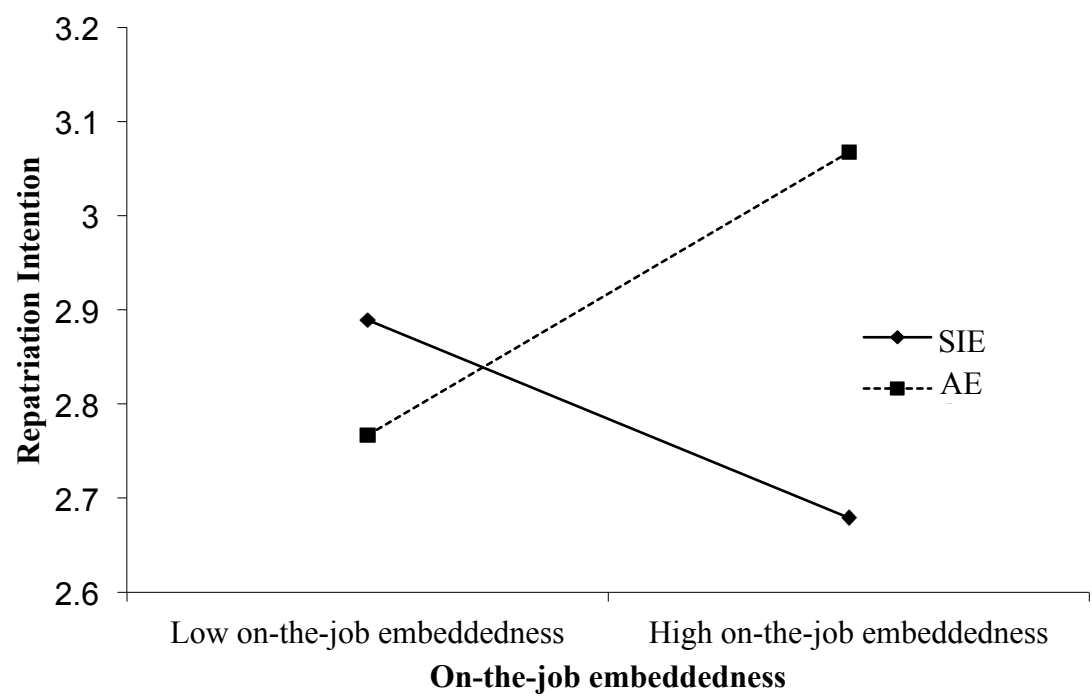


Figure 2. On-the-job Embeddedness Relation – The Moderating Effects of Expatriation Type on Early Repatriation Intention.



## Appendix A

### Items Comprising the Multi-Item Scales

(German version of all items available from the authors upon request)

#### *Expatriate Type*

1. Do you currently work in a country other than that of your upbringing?
2. Were you sent by your employer to work in a foreign subsidiary?

#### *On-the-job Embeddedness ( $\alpha = 0.89$ )*

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements.

3. I feel attached to this subsidiary/ company. [company for SIEs employed in domestic firms]
4. It would be difficult for me to leave this subsidiary/company. [company for SIEs employed in domestic firms]
5. I'm too caught up in this subsidiary/ company to leave [company for SIEs employed in domestic firms]
6. I feel tied to this subsidiary/ company. [company for SIEs employed in domestic firms]
7. I simply could not leave this subsidiary/ company. [company for SIEs employed in domestic firms] (reversed)
8. It would be easy for me to leave this subsidiary/ company. [company for SIEs employed in domestic firms]
9. I am tightly connected to this subsidiary/ company. [company for SIEs employed in domestic firms]

#### *Off-the-job Embeddedness ( $\alpha = 0.78$ )*

With respect to your family life abroad. (Links)

10. What is your current family status in your host country? [1, no partner or children in host country; 2, partner in host country; 3, children in host country; 4, partner and children in host country]
11. If you have a partner, does he/she work outside the home?
12. Do you own the home you live in?
13. Do your family members have a large social circle in this area?
14. How many of your close friends live nearby?

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements. (Fit)



15. I really love the place where I live.
16. I think of the community where I live as home.
17. The weather where I live is suitable for me.
18. My area offers the non-work activities that I like (e.g., cultural, sports, etc.).
19. This community is a good match for me.

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements. (Sacrifice)

20. Leaving this community would be very hard.
21. People respect me a lot in my community.

***Early Repatriation Intention ( $\alpha = 0.83$ )***

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements.

22. I plan to return to my home country within the next two years
23. I intend to repatriate to my home country to live there permanently
24. I intend to remain abroad permanently (reversed)
25. I will request an early return to a domestic assignment with my company

***Years abroad***

26. Overall, how many (working and non-working) years have you spent outside the country of your upbringing?
27. Do you have supervisory responsibilities for staff?

***Demographic indicators***

28. How old are you (in years)? [Age]
29. Your gender? [Gender]
30. In which country did you attend High School (or an equivalent thereof)? [National identity]
31. What's your nationality? [Nationality]

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